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## Kantian Ethics (Reference Entry)

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they respect one another as rational self-determining agents, or ends in themselves. It is also a harmony of ends in that people will seek to further one another's individual ends.

#### MORAL VISION

Kant held that people must mirror the realm of ends in their moral choices and actions, and that it is humanity's duty to bring about this ideal. He viewed the French Revolution and the Enlightenment as steps in the right direction; argued for a worldwide league of democratic states as a further step toward the realm of ends; and claimed, moreover, that the religious institutions of his time must embrace the ideal, setting aside their historically evolved differences. Kant maintained that moral philosophy must not formulate new duties, but should only clarify the moral principle operative in "common moral reason" in order to help ordinary persons more adequately resist immoral desires. Kant's clarification went beyond these confines, however, and it ended with an inspiring moral vision of the realm of ends as the purpose of history, the kingdom of God on Earth, and the ultimate individual and collective vocation.

Harry van der Linden

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SEE ALSO: Autonomy; Consistency; Deontological ethics; Duty; Enlightenment ethics; *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*; Kantian ethics; Post-Enlightenment ethics; Practical reason; Transcendentalism.

## Kantian ethics

DEFINITION: Moral system put forward by, or modeled after that of, Immanuel Kant

TYPE OF ETHICS: Enlightenment history

SIGNIFICANCE: Kantian ethics are concerned with the determination of an absolute and universal moral law and with the realization or modeling of an ideal society characterized by the mutual respect and harmonious coexistence of all moral agents.

The term "Kantian ethics" is commonly used to refer to the ethics of Immanuel Kant, as set forth in his *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* and other moral writings of the 1780's and 1790's. The term is also frequently used to refer to later moral theories that are similar to Kant's ethics but contain modifications in response to its perceived shortcomings. Three important examples are the moral theories of Hermann Cohen, John Rawls, and Jürgen Habermas.

#### IMMANUEL KANT

The ultimate purpose of moral rules, Kant argued, is to make possible his ideal society, the "realm of ends," which has two main aspects: All its members respect one another as self-determining agents who pursue different individual ends, and they seek to promote one another's ends. Kant believed that this

moral ideal would evolve if everyone followed the fundamental principle of his ethics: the “categorical imperative.” This imperative demands that one act only on those personal policies of conduct (“maxims”) that one can rationally will to become universal laws or principles that guide everyone’s conduct. According to Kant, obedience to the categorical imperative implies respect for others as self-determining beings with different individual ends; in acting only on maxims that can become universal laws, one acts only on principles to which others can rationally consent, and thus one upholds their right to legislate their own moral rules and pursue their own individual ends.

Kant also argued that general obedience to the categorical imperative would bring about universal mutual promotion of individual ends (as the other aspect of the realm of ends) because the imperative prohibits refusing to assist others. The reason for this prohibition is that one cannot rationally will that everyone adopt a maxim of not assisting others in the pursuit of their individual ends, for in such a world one would lack the assistance of others as a means for realizing one’s own happiness.

Attempts to overcome the shortcomings of Kant’s ethics, while preserving its strengths, have led to such influential examples of Kantian ethics as the moral theories of Hermann Cohen, John Rawls, and Jürgen Habermas. The most significant shortcomings are the following: The categorical imperative does not offer a sufficient criterion for determining universal laws, Kant failed to provide an adequate justification of the categorical imperative, he described moral agents as isolated legislators of universal laws, and he failed to address satisfactorily how the realm of ends can be institutionalized.

#### HERMANN COHEN

During the later part of the nineteenth century, Kant’s philosophy regained in Germany the great influence it had had during his own lifetime. This resurgence is known as neo-Kantianism, and one of its most important representatives is Hermann Cohen, who transformed Kant’s ideal of the realm of ends into a democratic socialist ideal. Cohen held that human agents can only arrive at universal laws, or approximations thereof, if all people become decision makers or colegislators in their institutions. Thus, Cohen argued that the realm of ends requires for its

realization not only political democracy, as Kant himself claimed, but also democracy in the workplace. Moreover, Cohen held that workplace democracy, in order to be effective, requires workers’ ownership of productive property. Cohen also maintained that these democratic socialist proposals were necessary for realizing the aspect of the realm of ends that all of its members promote one another’s individual ends.

#### JOHN RAWLS

A second main philosophical movement of renewed interest in Kant’s ethics and corresponding attempts to improve his ethics occurred during the 1970’s and 1980’s. The American philosopher John Rawls and the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas are the two major figures of this movement. Rawls’s primary concern is to argue for principles of justice that create a political society in accord with the realm of ends. More specifically, he argues for an extensive liberal welfare state based on the principles of justice that all persons must have equal political and civil liberties and that social and economic inequalities must be corrected to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged. Rawls holds that rational agents will opt for these principles of justice once their situation of choice, the “original position,” is made impartial by a “veil of ignorance” that makes them temporarily forget about all the specific facts concerning themselves and their society. Whether this innovative transformation of the categorical imperative—the veil forces one to opt for principles that are acceptable to all—justifies Rawls’s two principles of justice, and whether it can more generally be used to justify and explicate Kantian moral rules, are questions that have generated much debate.

#### JÜRGEN HABERMAS

The basic principle of the “discourse ethics” of Jürgen Habermas is a clear modification of the categorical imperative. The principle is that for a norm to be valid it must be accepted in a practical discussion by all those who are affected by the norm. The participants in the practical discourse must then also foresee the consequences of the general observance of the norm for the realization of the particular interests of each of them. This view that moral norms must be constructed by communities engaged in free practical discourse implies that the good society must be

fundamentally democratic; unlike Cohen and Rawls, however, Habermas has been somewhat vague and hesitant about the specific institutional ramifications of his Kantian ethics.

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SEE ALSO: Autonomy; Consistency; Deontological ethics; Enlightenment ethics; *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*; Kant, Immanuel; Post-Enlightenment ethics; Rawls, John; *Theory of Justice*, A.

## Karma

DEFINITION: Spiritual and ethical force generated by a person's actions

TYPE OF ETHICS: Religious ethics

SIGNIFICANCE: In Eastern religious traditions, karma is the motive force determining the transmigration of souls in successive incarnations: One's next life will be better or worse depending on the

good or evil of one's actions in this life. In modern Western culture, the term is used in a more general and secular sense to mean good luck or fortune earned through good deeds, or bad luck which is deserved as a result of malfeasance.

The word karma is a Sanskrit term meaning "action," "deed," or "work." By extension, it also came to mean the results of one's deeds and the law of retribution according to which one reaps what one sows.

The term karma does not appear in its extended sense in the oldest hymns of the Hindu scriptures. Nevertheless, the idea does appear that evil deeds have consequences that one would want to avoid. Furthermore, a person could obtain forgiveness from the god Varuṇa. The early hymns also taught continued personal existence beyond death, sometimes in an undifferentiated state, but sometimes with good men going to Heaven and others to a sort of hell.

In the Upaniṣads (composed roughly between the eighth and fifth centuries B.C.E.), Hindu speculation arrived at the conclusion that if one did not reap all that one had sown in this lifetime, one would inherit those uncompensated aftereffects in a future life. The cycle of rebirths came to be understood as the condition from which salvation was necessary. Furthermore, the law of karma was held to operate automatically; it was independent of the efforts of any god.

In its fully developed form, the law of karma is held to explain such phenomena as premature death (the result of misdeeds committed earlier in one's life or in a previous life), child prodigies (the child continues to develop skills already learned in a previous life), and differences in socioeconomic status (karma determines the caste into which one is born). In a moral universe, everything that happens to a person is earned; nothing is accidental or in any other way undeserved. In short, one determines one's own fate, in this and future lives.

Over time, Hindus developed several paths by which to escape the cycle of rebirth. The most important were enlightenment, work, love and devotion, and meditation, which also could be a method employed in other paths. The *Bhagavadgītā* (variously dated between the fifth and first centuries B.C.E.) dealt with the relationship between karma and one's caste duty. Simply put, it was the duty of each person to fulfill his or her role, even if the person found that role distasteful. Failure to do so would entangle one